



Hawaii State Department of Health

Disease Investigation Branch

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Viral Meningitis

(aseptic meningitis, non-bacterial meningitis)

What is viral meningitis?

Viral meningitis is an infection of the tissues covering the brain caused by one of several types of viruses. Most individuals are exposed to these viruses at some point in their lives, but few people get viral meningitis. Viral meningitis occurs more often in children than in adults.

How do you get it?

The viruses that cause viral meningitis are contagious, but most people who are infected with the viruses will not develop meningitis. Some viruses causing meningitis are spread through direct contact with fluids from the nose and throat of persons who are infected. Other viruses are found in the stools of infected people. These are commonly spread among small children and their caretakers when the hands are not cleaned well after toileting or diaper changing.

What are the symptoms of viral meningitis?

The symptoms include sudden fever, severe headache, muscle aches and sore throat. This is followed, usually within a day, by stiffness of the neck and back, nausea, and vomiting, especially in children. These symptoms typically fade 3 to 7 days after onset. Most patients recover completely from viral meningitis.

When do symptoms start?

The start of symptoms varies depending on the specific virus involved, but the onset usually occurs within 7 days of infection with the virus.

Should a child with viral meningitis stay home from school or day care?

Yes, because some viral meningitis is caused by intestinal viruses that are passed in the stools, children with viral meningitis who are not yet toilet trained should not attend school or day care unless they have written permission to return from a physician.

What is the treatment for viral meningitis?

There are no specific medicines available to treat viral meningitis.

How can you keep from getting it?

Because most persons who are infected with the viruses that cause viral meningitis do not become ill, it can be difficult to prevent the spread of the virus. Maintaining good personal hygiene can help you stay healthy. The best way to prevent this illness is to wash your hands thoroughly and often, especially after using the toilet or changing diapers and before eating.

For more information, see the CDC's website at http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/enterovirus/viral_meningitis.htm